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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000347

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#) [AJ](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: TOUGH DASHNAK TALK ON N-K, TURKEY AT PARTY
CONFERENCE SPARKS CONTROVERSY

1. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified. Please treat accordingly.

SUMMARY

2. (SBU) Dashnak Party Chairman Hrand Margaryan's February 6 comments on relations with Turkey, N-K, and Georgia's Armenian population sparked renewed controversy among Armenia's political elite. Margaryan declared during his address to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF or "Dashnaksutyun") 29th World Congress that the GOAM should not entertain closer relations with Turkey, endorsed permanent independent status for all geographic regions involved in the N-K conflict and called for autonomy for the Armenian enclaves in Georgia's Javakheti region. FM Vartan Oskanian, who himself addressed the meeting before Margaryan's speech, was quick to distance himself and the GOAM from these statements during press opportunities this week. Margaryan's comments appeared carefully calibrated for the Diasporan audience that is still a significant support base for the ARF. The extent to which local ARF politicians are willing to adopt Margaryan's speech as a party mantra will affect the ARF's privileged place in the governing coalition. While it is still too early to separate last week's hype from long-term effects on party policies, the ARF congress hurled the party back into the domestic spotlight. End Summary.

SPEECH MAKES HEADLINES FOR ARF

3. (SBU) ARF Chairman Hrand Margaryan opened the party's 29th World Congress February 6 with a controversial speech that has sparked debate among Armenia's political elite. Margaryan declared during the speech that the GOAM should halt discussions of rapprochement with Turkey until the GOT met all ARF pre-conditions. He called any proposal for border opening "irrelevant" until the GOT classified the events of 1912-15 as genocide. Margaryan accused the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission of "treachery" against Armenia and criticized its "secret funding by world powers."

4. (SBU) Margaryan reiterated the ARF's traditionally harsh stand regarding Nagorno-Karabagh. He told the audience categorically that no land involved in the N-K conflict should ever be returned to Azerbaijan. He suggested expanding the current areas controlled by Armenian forces to include other regions historically inhabited by Armenians (referring to Shahumian and Getashen). These comments incited waves of enthusiastic applause from the audience and wincing from GOAM representatives seated behind him on the stand.

5. (SBU) The most unexpected part of Margaryan's speech was a call for autonomy for Armenians living in Georgia's Javakheti region. He declared that Javakh was "now a part of the Armenian agenda" and accused successive Georgian regimes of discrimination and exploitation of the country's Armenian population. He fell short of calling for an independent state and clarified that an autonomous Armenian region should exist within the Georgian state. Margaryan claimed that the Armenian Diaspora was increasingly supportive of the ARF's approach to Javakheti.

SPEECH CREATES HEADACHES FOR THE GOAM

6. (SBU) FM Vartan Oskanian, who himself addressed

the meeting before Margaryan's speech, was quick to distance himself and the GOAM from these statements during press opportunities this week. Oskanian did not criticize Margaryan's comments, but went to great lengths to categorize them as ARF opinions that "do not reflect Government of Armenia policy." MFA spokesman Hamlet Gasparian responded aggressively to the speech by reciting constitutional passages giving the president authority to create foreign policy. Local news outlets carried his closing statement that, "[Foreign Policy] issues are a constitutional prerogative of the President," not of the Dashnaks.

MEETING ATTRACTS DIASPORA, LOCAL POWER PLAYERS

17. (U) The ARF Congress was a standing-room only event that included an impressive selection of high-level GOAM representatives. The Prime Minister, a majority of cabinet-level ministers and parliamentarians from the whole range of Armenia's political spectrum attended the meeting. Most speeches from GOAM representatives made congratulatory remarks about the ARF's place among the GOAM governing coalition and the party's current role as a cooperative political player. The event attracted a large number of Diasporans who support ARF and was the largest public event for the party since its reemergence in 1998. An ARF parliamentarian told us that the most enthusiastic support for the event came from Diasporan ARF chapters in France and Russia.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) Margaryan's comments appeared carefully calibrated for the Diasporan audience that is still a significant support base for the ARF. The extent to which local ARF politicians are willing to adopt Margaryan's speech as a party mantra will no doubt affect the ARF's privileged place in the governing coalition. Some are quick to forecast the controversy surrounding the speech as one of the first fissures before the coalition's possible breakdown. While it is still too soon to determine how much of last week's hype has real resonance within ARF party leaders and policy, Margaryan's comments and the ARF's splashy World Congress has definitely hurled the party back into the domestic spotlight -- for now.

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